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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3940

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1757

RUEHKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR PRIORITY 0173

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 0055

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1624

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2193

RHMFUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAWJA/DOJ WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1366

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 ASHGABAT 000801

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

FROM CHARGE D'AFFAIRES RICHARD HOAGLAND

STATE FOR P, S/P, E, G, R, SCA/FO, SCA/CEN, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: ENGAGE, ENGAGE, ENGAGE

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0363

[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 0223

[1](#)C. 07 ASHGABAT 0873

[1](#)D. 07 ASHGABAT 0779

[1](#)E. 07 ASHGABAT 0778

[1](#)1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the fundamentals of U.S. policy in Central Asia have remained consistent and on-target: to advocate political and economic reform as the keystone of America's strategic interests. After 17 years, the countries have differentiated themselves, even if they share many common values, and the world has changed. Russia is no longer the passive basket case it was in the 1990s, and China is now extending its economic power into the region. As we look at what we can achieve in the homestretch of this Administration, it is time seriously to refocus our approach to Central Asia. In some ways, over the years, we have begun to let ideology trump reality. I suggest it's time to reverse that formula.

THE RUSSIA PROBLEM

[1](#)3. (SBU) In the decade after Central Asian independence, we didn't need to take Russia much into account. We in practice assigned Central Asia, the back-water of the Soviet Union, to back-burner status. However, 9/11, a newly assertive and increasingly wealthy Russia, the danger of Iran, the fragility of Afghanistan, and increased energy diplomacy require us to reassess our attention to Central Asia.

¶4. (SBU) During Vladimir Putin's first term as president of Russia, he asserted what the Kremlin called the "near abroad" (the former Soviet Socialist Republics) as Russia's special sphere of influence, which if taken to its zero-sum extreme would make them minimally sovereign satellite dependencies of Russia. The "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan dramatically heightened Russian paranoia that the ultimate U.S. goal was to overthrow existing governments, install pro-Western regimes, and encircle, weaken, and, ultimately, break up Russia. By 2004, a flood of Russian black propaganda, both overt and covert, began to brand U.S. democracy organizations as fronts for covert operations to implement "color revolutions." Some Central Asian governments, buying into this propaganda, began to crack down on organizations like the National Democratic Institute, Freedom House, and Human Rights Watch. This, in turn, contributed to U.S. attitudes hardening against Central Asia's regimes.

¶5. (SBU) With Russian economic recovery, and then with the skyrocketing price of oil, Russia accelerated its effort to buy up Central Asian strategic infrastructure, and especially for Gazprom to seal its long-term monopoly on Central Asian natural gas and export pipelines. However, the Central Asian states have come to value and protect their independence. Like all post-colonial states, they will naturally maintain close, if wary, relations with the former metropolitan power, but they don't much like Russia's inveterate heavy-handedness and even less its intransigent racism.

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THE CHINA FACTOR

¶6. (U) Since Central Asian independence, we have preached that economic and political reform go hand-in-hand, that ultimately one is not possible without the other. In general, that has been true in Western history, including in the more recent examples in Central Europe and the Baltics that had a European heritage. But it's not necessarily true in Central Asia that never experienced the European Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment that are the essential philosophical foundations for Western democracy.

¶7. (SBU) The Chinese example of the past decade has given the Central Asian states a powerful new model: economic strength and wealth-building without political reform. For Central Asian presidents and the elite who support them, whose sometimes self-serving mantra seems to be "stability, stability, stability," the Chinese model is more attractive than the "messiness of democracy." In the longer term, a true Central Asian middle class might well begin to demand greater political plurality, more freedom of expression, and a greater say in governance. But that process is generational, as we have seen in Kyrgyzstan, which in the 1990s was considered the most progressive of the Central Asian states, which experienced a "color revolution" in 2005, but which, in the end, is not much better than any of the rest.

TURKMENISTAN

¶8. (SBU) In Central Asia, Turkmenistan is a special case. From the mid-1990s until the end of 2006, it was very much the odd-man-out because of its repressive and xenophobic dictatorship. The first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazov (1991-2006), who styled himself Turkmenbashi ("Father of the Turkmen"), was a Soviet-style, totalitarian despot who established an eccentric personality cult, increasingly sank into paranoia and xenophobia, and turned his government -- and, thus, his nation -- into an international laughing stock and pariah. When I led the U.S.-Russia Consultations on the Caucasus and Central Asia (2001-2003), we would come to Turkmenistan, and both sides -- Moscow and Washington alike -- would simply roll their eyes and move on to the next topic. Under President Gurbanguly

Berdimuhamedov (inaugurated February 14, 2007), Turkmenistan is authoritarian, but at peace with its neighbors and with reformist potential, and seeks to reclaim a respected place in the family of nations. But deeply scarred by its past, and hugely lacking experience and ability, Turkmenistan can and will move only at its own pace.

TURKMENISTAN'S CONSTRAINTS: IMAGE

¶9. (SBU) Turkmenistan's biggest constraint, after its stultifying isolation and the debilitating lack of ability among its officials (not all, but many) is simply but enormously its reputation. It will take many years to overcome its many negative stereotypes. One Senior Foreign Service Officer who has never set foot in contemporary Turkmenistan but who should know better, archly called Turkmenistan "the ickiest of all the Ickystans!" It's a quick laugh line but a poor guide to policy.

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¶10. (SBU) Turkmenistan does itself no favors by making it hard for international journalists to enter and report from the country. It's not impossible, but it takes gumption and persistence. One who has done so and who has reported honestly and objectively in the last six months is the BBC's Natalia Antelava. But too many still parachute in and report the brainless "lots of white marble and spooky empty streets" articles. Yes, there's lots of white marble. No the streets are not empty, at least not if you go one block off the ceremonial boulevards.

¶11. (SBU) The Turkmen opposition websites in Moscow and Europe, which some NGOs and some U.S. government offices rely on, are another problem. Run by exiles who have never been in post-Niyazov Turkmenistan (and we speculate some of these websites might possibly be infiltrated by the Russian special services), they exaggerate bits of gossip -- most infamously, the idiotic cockroach-on-the-newsreader's-desk-leads-to-p urge fantasy that even National Public Radio broadcast as "too good to check." A similar canard is the recent assertion that Berdimuhamedov has banned Western clothes and forced Turkmen women into head-to-toe traditional dress. We still see regular and sniggering references to President Berdimuhamedov as "Niyazov's former dentist who might be his illegitimate son."

¶12. (SBU) In Turkmenistan, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) has a special problem. At its best -- and it does indeed often do good work as I saw in Tajikistan -- RFE/RL is a "surrogate" source of news and information in countries that bend and distort the truth and deny open discussion. In recent years, in too many cases in Central Asia -- and this is especially true in Turkmenistan -- RFE/RL has hired dissidents, sometimes even cranks (one threatened in frustration to blow up a police station in Ashgabat), rather than reasonably professional journalists. This simply feeds the maw of the Russian propaganda machine, and, as a result, RFE/RL has picked up the negative sobriquet of Radio Oppo. Governments like Turkmenistan's, with whom we conscientiously and persistently engage on human rights, including freedom of information, sometimes ask why they should tolerate, let alone legally register, a radio service not just lacking objectivity but also, as they perceive it, dedicated to undermining stability and overthrowing their government. When we advocate strongly for RFE/RL, we, sad to say, lose a degree of credibility on the larger democracy and human rights issues.

TURKMENISTAN'S CONSTRAINTS: HISTORY AND PSYCHOLOGY

¶13. (SBU) Turkmenistan is in the earliest stages of transition from its 20th-century Soviet experience and its debilitating dictatorship. When pressed on Western values, Turkmen officials are wont to remind us that they are subject to the "oriental mindset." To many of us, this smacks of

facile rationalization. In fact, there's something to it. At a fundamental level, it is a recognition that Central Asia does not have the long-established institutions of the West that facilitate and support democratic civil society. It also accounts for other things we find annoying -- especially their profound aversion to saying "no" to suggestions and

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proposals and their consequent strong preference simply not to answer. And sometimes silence means their equivalent of an interagency process is grinding away. The imperative for U.S. policymakers is to recognize when silence really does mean "no," and then hold back on our efforts until a more propitious time. Brow-beating in a culture that puts great emphasis on "face" and "respect" gets us nowhere. We need to discern better when to make tactical retreats until we have built stronger relationships of trust. Those relationships will, however, develop over time and with repeated high-level contact.

TURKMENISTAN'S REALITIES

¶14. (SBU) Within four hours of Niyazov's death, one of his deputy prime ministers, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, was anointed before dawn on December 27, 2006, as the consensus choice of the Turkmen ruling elite. They knew what had gone badly wrong under Niyazov and wanted a new direction, while maintaining peace and stability. President Berdimuhamedov has started to

-- rebuild (but not yet reform) the education system Niyazov had devastated (he once said, "A dim people are easier ruled");

-- renovate the health-care system Niyazov had gutted;

-- reinstitute pensions Niyazov had cancelled and kick-start rural development;

-- reopen Turkmenistan to the world and repair relations with neighboring countries;

-- undertake economic reforms to create a market economy and encourage entrepreneurs to create small and medium businesses;

-- bring Turkmenistan up to international human-rights standards;

-- open Turkmenistan's world-class hydrocarbon deposits (mostly natural gas) to international investment and development; and, concurrently,

-- begin to break the Russian Gazprom monopoly on Turkmenistan's hydrocarbon exports.

¶15. (U) Within 48 hours of Niyazov's death, the U.S. government crafted a forward-leaning policy that offered to engage with Turkmenistan to the fullest degree Turkmenistan was willing (and able) to engage with the United States. In practice, our daily effort has been to exercise the patience necessary to move at Turkmenistan's own pace, so long as it moves generally in the right direction. This policy has proved to be wise. In the last 17 months, Berdimuhamedov has

-- reaffirmed Turkmenistan's UN-approved "permanent neutrality," and has conscientiously balanced Turkmenistan's relations among the major global and regional powers -- Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and Iran -- without favoring one too much over the others;

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-- received over 500 diplomatic and business delegations -- the United States alone has sent more delegations since

Berdimuhamedov's inauguration than it did in the previous six years;

- traveled broadly internationally to build diplomatic relationships, and repaired frozen relations with neighbors Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan;

- sought increasingly to play a positive role to stabilize and reconstruct Afghanistan;

- created and empowered a number of government think tanks to review legislation and propose new policies, especially for fiscal responsibility, economic reform, empowerment of entrepreneurs, and human rights -- of these, the star in the crown so far is the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights; and

- reformulated his economic team to achieve reform results and has begun working productively with the international financial institutions, and has begun infrastructure renewal projects to benefit the provincial centers and the more isolated rural populations.

¶16. (SBU) Despite this enormous change in such a relatively short time, Turkmenistan does not meet our standards:

- it listens to us, but certainly not exclusively;

- it is secretive and sometimes makes bone-headed decisions we have to try to walk back;

- it is a one-party state without separation of powers and does not have even a glimmer of independent media;

- it is leery of empowering civil society for fear of engendering instability and losing control of its fragile progress; and

- it is inevitably a creature of its Soviet legacy and, thus, is wildly corrupt by Western standards.

¶17. (SBU) Because of the Niyazov era, Turkmenistan is starting from even less than zero, below where the other Central Asian states were at independence in 1991. Turkmenistan matters strategically because it is one of the five littoral states of the Caspian Sea and possesses enormous natural gas deposits. Two of the other hydrocarbon-rich Caspian states, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, have long been making a credible effort on financial and economic reform, and are reasonably pro-Western. We should nurture the U.S.-Turkmenistan relationship so that Ashgabat, Astana, and Baku form at the least an informal, self-confident bloc with which we can work.

WHAT TO DO: ENGAGE, ENGAGE, ENGAGE

¶18. (SBU) The U.S.-Turkmenistan relationship will never grow any faster than President Berdimuhamedov and his circle want it to grow. But we can accelerate that pace through significantly greater engagement with him. By this I do not

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mean greater resources for assistance and exchange projects -- although we most certainly do very badly need that; the consistently falling budgets are shamefully counter-productive.

¶19. (SBU) What is needed is more frequent and sustained face-to-face engagement at very high levels. This is crucial because in an Asian (and post-Soviet) society like Turkmenistan's, all boils down to relationships-of-trust and building "face." This is not acquiescing to despotism; it's engaging with reality to achieve a longer-term greater objective. It is reality versus dogma.

¶20. (SBU) Our democratic ideals can be implemented but they

cannot be imposed -- especially where the institutions to support them do not exist. And they do not now nor have they ever really existed in Central Asia. The Soviets and Niyazov so devastated Turkmen society that we can expect no quick embraces of democratic structures. Niyazov drove out the educated elites who would be the nucleus of democratic reform. We cannot, moreover, automatically expect Central Asian governments to welcome or even to tolerate those organizations that Russian black propaganda has branded as "color revolutionaries," especially when we never much fought back against that propaganda in the first place.

¶21. (SBU) The implication for us is that we need to shy away from list-making and public embarrassments and give every effort instead to precise application of effective measures. In Turkmenistan, as USAID is already doing successfully, that means working at the grass roots -- with village councils, parent-teacher associations, water-user collectives, farmers' cooperatives, and anything else at the most fundamental level where people need to be convinced they can shake off 80 years of the Soviet legacy that turned them into passive cynics. If we can be patient enough to work "slow and low," democracy will prevail.

¶22. (SBU) I believe Turkmenistan is on an upward trajectory toward international standards, but it will not ever move at our desired pace. We need to be firm without lecturing: what is tough-minded in our eyes can appear by Turkmen standards of reality to be ill-informed, supercilious, and ideologically arrogant. Equally important, it gives Russia ammunition to label our altruistic efforts as "democracy bolshevism." Most to the point, when we limit attention to and contact with a country like Turkmenistan because of ideological touchpoints, we cut off our noses to spite our faces. We simply cannot afford anymore to limit our engagement because they have not achieved quickly what we have advocated. To achieve our long-term goals of human dignity and freedom for all, we need to let reality trump dogma. We need to pursue our national interests with a maximum of creativity, intelligence, and flexibility. We need to engage frequently -- candidly and consistently -- at the highest levels.
HOAGLAND